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ABSTRACT

The public's reaction to the television film "The Day After" demonstrates that when television responsibly and sensitively presents a controversial yet thought-provoking issue, an educational and enlightening experience can result. The film was developed and produced by ABC Motion Pictures to inspire debate and discussion about the effects of nuclear war. A tremendous public debate was generated even before the film was aired in 1983. The film was the 12th-ranked program of all time, seen by an estimated 100 million people. Many psychologists and educators warned of dire consequences for children exposed to "The Day After," and the National Education Association issued its first-ever parent advisory for a television program, warning parents not to allow children to watch the film alone. ABC took a number of steps both before and after the film was broadcast to assess the public's reaction to the controversy surrounding children, politics, and the public. Two months before the air date, qualitative focus groups comprised of parents and children viewed the film. Results indicated no adverse emotional reactions, and all focus group viewers wanted to talk about what they had seen. A viewer's guide was developed by ABC for use in junior and senior high schools. A national survey of 1,921 adults and children between the ages of 10-17 years was conducted after the broadcast. Results indicated that viewers evaluated the program favorably, thought that children would be able to cope with issues raised by the film, watched the film with someone, and discussed the film during or after its airing. (RS)

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ED 375 441

Broadcast Preparations for and Consequences of *The Day After*

Guy E. Lometti

1992

The Day After was a television movie that stimulated unprecedented publicity and discussion even before it aired on November 20, 1983. Much of the attention the film received in the press, and the discussions taking place across the United States, centered upon such controversial issues as the film's presumed political overtones and public concern about the motion picture's effects on viewers—particularly young children.

In reviewing the sociology of *The Day After,* four topics seem to be of particular interest: (a) the origin of the program, (b) the public debate surrounding the film, (c) the economics of *The Day After,* and (d) the impact of the movie on ABC and the viewing public.

ORIGINS OF *THE DAY AFTER*

The origins of *The Day After* were quite simple. Brandon Stoddard, president, ABC Motion Pictures, Inc. saw the theatrical film, *The China Syndrome,* "and wondered what the home-front consequences of nuclear war

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would be" (*Time,* 1983, p. 85). The script developed from this television concept was written by Edward Hume after he researched the subject for six months. A Congressional study by the Office of Technology Assessment titled "The Effects of Nuclear War" formed the basis for much of the film's scenario. The author consulted with scientists, military officers, private organizations, and government agencies.

Stoddard said the film would "provide an unrelenting and detailed view of three nuclear explosions in and around Kansas City, and what the effects might be on average American citizens, far removed from political origins or explanations. It is not a story of war rooms, hot lines and cabinet meetings, but a drama about ordinary people immediately before, during and after a massive nuclear attack" (ABC, 1982).

The ABC television network broadcast *The Day After.* This ABC Theatre presentation (a showcase for movies produced by ABC Circle Films—a division of the ABC corporation) was directed by Nicholas Meyer and produced by Robert Papazian.

In talking about ABC's purpose in making the film, Stoddard hoped that "*The Day After* (would) inspire the nations of this earth, their people and their leaders, to find means to avert the fateful day" (Collins, 1983, p. D16). Nicholas Meyer, the director, said that his intent in the movie was to produce a dialogue (Rabinowitz & Boxer, 1983). Further, he called it "the most worthwhile thing I've done with my life" (Mayer, 1983, p. 1).

PUBLIC DEBATE

Broadcast Perspective

Throughout the production of *The Day After* great care was taken to prevent political viewpoints from becoming manifest in the movie. Stoddard said, "We never intended the film to be a political statement... The movie simply says that nuclear war is horrible... That is all it says. That is a very safe statement" (*Time,* 1983, p. 84). Further, he argued that the film had "no political discussion or bent or leaning whatsoever" (Smith, 1983, p. 46). This view was echoed by Alfred R. Schneider, vice president of policy and standards for ABC, Inc. who said that "the network...took care to excise editorial statements and to create ambiguity in the events leading up to the bombings" ...so that there is enough uncertainty "about who pressed the button first" (Smith, 1983, p. 46). Meyer went on to say that "*The Day After* does not advocate disarmament, build-down, buildup, or freeze. I didn't want to alienate any viewers" (*Time,* 1983, p. 84).

Partisan Points of View

Despite the efforts made by ABC to treat the film neutrally (or perhaps because of this practice) activists from the left and the right seized upon the film for their partisan political purposes. The nuclear freeze movement proponents adopted the film as their own, thus prompting the political right to yell foul and attack the movie as a "two hour commercial for disarmament" (*Newsweek,* 1983).

Contraband copies of the film were circulating among special interest groups more than two months before the broadcast. Network officials described this as an extraordinary development for a made-for-television film (Smith, 1983). For example, in New York City a group of about 30 people representing philanthropic foundations that sponsor disarmament causes met to view such a copy of *The Day After* more than one month before the broadcast was scheduled to be aired (Hoffman, 1983). In fact some copies were available as early as May 1983. Hoffman (1983) reported that an insider concerned that the film reach the public had apparently made the bootleg copies.

Nicholas Meyer expressed concern about the bootleg copies. "What they've seen isn't finished... Whatever they're talking about is hearsay and carbon-copied... they're trying to affect the credibility of the film, yea or nay, in the minds of those who just want to watch it. They're trying to make up the minds of people beforehand" (Shales, 1983, p. 10).

Promotional Campaign

The promotional campaign planned by ABC was a great success in part because of the tremendous public debate generated from other quarters. According to Brandon Stoddard, the campaign itself was, "extensive, more on the scale of a campaign for a major mini-series than a two-hour film" (Smith, 1983, p. 46). Instead of being promoted only a few days ahead of time, Stoddard said, "the campaign for *The Day After*... (would) probably begin three weeks to a month beforehand" (Smith, 1983, p. 46).

Once initial publicity for the movie had been generated, however, press coverage of *The Day After* took on a life of its own. Stoddard commented favorably about the amazing coverage by saying that "the special interest groups were all doing a fine job" promoting his film (Hoffman, 1983, p. 80).

In scope the publicity surrounding *The Day After* was unprecedented.

> It made the cover stories of *Newsweek* and *TV Guide* and segments on CBS's *60 Minutes* and the CBS *Morning News,* NBC's *Today* and ABC's *Good Morning America.* It was page one—and often banner headline news in scores

> of newspapers around the country, and received extensive commentary in both domestic and foreign journals of opinion, including *The New Republic, The Nation, The Progressive, The National Review, The New Statesman* (U.K.), *Nuclear Times* and the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists.* (Friedman, 1984, p. 12)

The Day After was clearly a national event.

ABC previewed the film to political, religious, and community leaders (Smith, 1983). The President of the United States screened the movie and *Broadcasting* reported that he "was quoted as saying he welcomed the nationwide dialogue *The Day After* was anticipated to prompt" (*Broadcasting,* 1983a). Gene Cowen, vice president, Government Relations indicated that about 20 U.S. senators and representatives had requested to see the movie and their requests were granted as was the Pentagon's (*Broadcasting,* 1983a). United States Congressional Representatives Dan Glickman (Democrat, Kansas) and Elliot H. Levitas (Democrat, Georgia) cosponsored a resolution urging that *The Day After* be shown in Russia (Friedman, 1984).

Viewer Interest

Long before any press coverage of *The Day After* or any ratings data documenting the size of the viewing audience were available, ABC had research data which indicated there was strong viewer interest in the movie (Smith, 1983). Results from a concept test in which respondents were asked in two separate studies to react to a capsule description of the film indicated that interest in seeing the movie was quite high. These tests consisted of a national probability phone survey of 1,000 adults and a Preview House audience of 375 adults. Respondents were either read a description of *The Day After* over the phone or exposed to the same description in a printed self-administered questionnaire and then asked about their interest in viewing the movie.

The Television Audience

ABC research reported that *The Day After* was the 12th-ranked program of all time in household ratings, the 5th-ranked in household delivery. But it was the highest-rated made-for-TV movie ever broadcast (*Broadcasting,* 1983b). The 46 Nielsen rating indicated that 38,550,000 households were tuned in to the average minute of *The Day After.* This rating level meant that an estimated 100 million people saw part or all of the movie. While the size of the audience surprised many in the industry, some predicted that *The Day After* would be the most watched television program ever. It was not, but it did come close.

THE ECONOMICS OF *THE DAY AFTER*

Boycotts

Jerry Falwell, leader of the conservative organization Moral Majority, threatened to orchestrate a boycott against the 16 companies that sponsored *The Day After*. This and other threatened boycotts from the political right kept some advertisers away from the telecast. Many did not want to be associated with nuclear entertainment (Mermigas, 1983).

Because ABC was sensitive to these concerns, John Keever, vice president of sales for ABC-TV said that the network previewed the film for many advertisers so that they could see for themselves exactly what they were buying. "One way to alleviate advertiser concerns, he said, will be the unusual distribution of commercials. . . .[T]here won't be any commercials after the bomb explodes" (Smith, 1983, p. 46). Thus the 25 spots were seen in the first hour of the broadcast.

Advertisers felt that they based their decisions to sponsor *The Day After* on sound business reasons and as Jack Sholl, media director for Warner-Lambert, said, "We consider ourselves a responsible advertiser. . . We cannot let special-interest groups, no matter how well intentioned, dictate our advertising and marketing practices" (Mermigas, 1983, p. 1).

Despite the threats, a few days after the telecast, on the November 23, 1983 broadcast of the syndicated television talk show Donohue, Rev. Falwell indicated he would not pursue the boycott.

Costs and Revenues

Anthony Thomopoulos, president of the ABC Broadcast Group, predicted that *The Day After* would probably break even with overseas sales, a second airing in the United States, and an investment tax credit. He indicated that the purpose of *The Day After* was not to make a profit but rather to stimulate thought and discussion (*Broadcasting*, 1983b).

ABC was forced by the marketplace demands (or in this case the lack of demand) to cut prices for 30-second commercials to bargain rates. The cost-per-thousand viewers was about $1.00 (*Broadcasting*, 1983b). The 25 thirty-second commercial spots sold for an average of $100,000 each. The $7 million film thus generated about $2,500,000 in advertising revenue (Mandese, 1983). Some of these spots reportedly sold for only $60,000 to $67,000 each (Reiss, 1983; Mandese, 1983). J. Walter Thompson senior vice president/media director Richard Kostrya said that "it was an exceedingly good buy," since normal scatter prices were about $130,000 per 30-second spot (Mandese, 1983, p. 8).

For all their worry, the advertisers got a great price and an unexpectedly large audience. ABC originally estimated the audience would be about 70 million viewers but Nielsen ratings indicated that more than 100 million people saw the film. Advertisers bought time on the show for sound business reasons. They used the opportunity to launch new campaigns or to get an early start on their Christmas advertising schedule—all for rock-bottom prices (Mermigas, 1983).

THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF *THE DAY AFTER*

Presumed Impact on Children

Many psychologists and educators warned of dire consequences for children exposed to *The Day After*. Typical of these fears were those expressed by Dr. Dorothy Singer who said, "The sense of loss suffered by the families on the screen may provoke profound fear about children's separation from parents. I fear children will have mightmares about the show and worry about it for weeks or even months. Older children and adults may have a sense of hopelessness" (Collins, 1983, p. D16).

The National Education Association (NEA), the United States' largest educational organization, issued its first ever parent advisory on a television program. The NEA recommended that parents should not, under any circumstances, allow their children to watch *The Day After* alone (NEA, 1983). School districts issued warnings to parents and in some locations sent letters home advising parents that school-age children should not watch the movie at all.

ABC's Pre- and Postbroadcasting Activities

ABC took a number of steps both before and after the film was televised to assess the public's reaction to the controversy surrounding children, politics, and the public in order to ensure that the broadcast was handled responsibly. These included the following prebroadcast activities: (a) review of the literature, (b) consultations with child development specialists, (c) development of a viewers guide, (d) focus group research with children and their parents, and (e) recommendations regarding children viewing the motion picture. After the broadcast: (a) data were compiled on immediate viewer reactions; (b) a social research survey was conducted; and (c) other survey results were reviewed.

PREBROADCAST ACTIVITIES

Review of the Literature

In order to gain a fuller understanding of the extent to which children were aware of the nuclear war issue, the ABC Social Research Unit searched the social science literature for research that addressed this question. Evidence was found that indicated that 40 percent of American children know about nuclear weapons by the time they are 12 years old (and some as young as six). Further, the research suggested that children feel a need for more information about this topic and want to talk about it. They think that when this information is coupled with informed discussion, it enables them to cope with their fears and concerns about the threat of nuclear war.

Consultation with Child Development Specialists

In an effort to explore how children would respond to *The Day After*, the film was screened with child psychiatrists, developmental psychologists, and child educators. These child-oriented specialists were asked to view the movie with an eye toward how children of various ages would react.

In general, they found *The Day After* to be a powerful yet sensitive treatment of an issue of concern to children as well as adults. They felt that children already have an awareness of the threat of nuclear war and that the film would provide a unique opportunity for them to share their ideas and feelings with parents, peers, and teachers.

Specifically, the consultants predicted that younger children would not grasp the full impact of the movie, and might even be bored by the scenes that were not high in action. However, they thought that children would want to talk about what they saw with adults who could answer their questions and clarify confusing information. Although they might not see the global implications of the film, younger children would be "able to comfortably deal with any upsetting portrayals, especially within a context of parental support and warmth." Older children and adolescents were expected to see the broader implications of the presentation due to their more sophisticated cognitive capabilities, yet their "more mature and adult coping mechanisms" would enable them to deal with the emotions that would be raised. The experts felt that this age group would be especially receptive to channeling their reactions to *The Day After* into an educational experience.

Development of a Viewer's Guide

In order to maximize the educational benefits of the film, a *Viewer's Guide* was developed by ABC's Community Relations Department in conjunction

with the Cultural Information Service. The Guide was intended for use in junior and senior high schools, and was also distributed to libraries, colleges, and civic and religious groups across the country. (A total of 500,000 copies were mailed.) It included discussion questions and exercises to be included in the curriculum both before and after the broadcast, as well as a bibliography of sources.

Focus Group Research with Children and Their Parents

After reviewing research information and gathering the opinions of child experts, the ABC Social Research Unit conducted qualitative focus groups to determine children's actual reactions to *The Day After*. The film was screened for children and their parents. This research was conducted approximately two months before air date.

Methodology. Twenty-seven children were divided into two age groups—10 to 12 years, and 13 to 16 years old. The children saw the film in a group, together with one of their parents. After seeing the film, children and parents were interviewed in separate groups.

Findings. No immediate adverse emotional reactions to the film were observed for either children or parents. Although most experienced sadness and fear, all were able to deal comfortably with their emotions. Young children (the 10-12-year-olds), as expected, were bored with the first 40 minutes and the last third of the motion picture—the scenes low in action. They perked up and were very attentive during the scenes which showed the firing of missiles and the nuclear explosions.

Also, as predicted by cognitive developmental theory, the younger children did not understand the abstract global issues presented in the film. They experienced it concretely and were upset by the portrayals of death, destruction, and the separation of family members—those events to which they could relate from their own real-world experiences. On the other hand, the older children and adolescents were able to abstract the more far-reaching implications—that this could happen to us today. It is this concept that can spark such powerful emotions as depression and hopelessness.

All of the focus group viewers—children and adults alike—wanted to talk about what they had seen. They also had many questions about the events portrayed in the film and the issues that it raised. Whereas the younger children talked mostly about the characters and what happened to them, the older children's discussion centered around preventing or coping with a nuclear attack. Yet there was a common thread that ran through the discussions of children, teenagers, and adults—that everyone should see *The Day After*.

Follow-up. In order to see what children's long-term emotional reactions to the movie were, the parents were interviewed via telephone one to two

weeks later. There were no reports of nightmares, sleeplessness, or emotional disturbance of any kind on the part of the children or adolescents. Most parents said that their children had discussed the film with them and other family members on the day of viewing or the following day, and some had talked about it with their friends. For the most part, by the time of the follow-up *The Day After* was not a salient issue for the youngsters. The parents, however, were anxiously awaiting the day of broadcast and were caught up in the prebroadcast nationwide discussion.

Recommendations Regarding Children Viewing the Motion Picture

ABC recommended that if children were going to watch *The Day After* they should do so in the company of their parents or other important adults. The rationale behind this decision was that children would have many questions about the film and would need to discuss their reactions. If they viewed with their parents children would not only be able to talk about the movie but also have the opportunity to share their feelings in a supportive environment.

To encourage children and adults to watch *The Day After* together and to discuss their reactions, three steps were undertaken. First, an opening prologue preceded the film. It was spoken by John Collum who played the father/farmer character in the movie. He stated that, "in homes where young people are watching, we'd like to suggest that the family watch together so that parents can be on hand to answer questions and discuss issues raised by the movie." An additional function of this prologue was to enhance in the minds of children the distinction between John Collum, the actor, and the character he played in the film, thus providing the appropriate perspective on reality versus drama. Second, the viewer's guide encouraged parents to watch together with children.

Third, a special edition of ABC News *Viewpoint* was broadcast immediately following the film. This program was designed to foster discussion about ways to prevent nuclear war rather than to concentrate on its horrors. Hosted by ABC newsman Ted Koppel, the program featured an interview with U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz and a panel discussion with Henry Kissinger (former Secretary of State), William F. Buckley Jr., Robert S. McNamara (former Defense Secretary), scientist Carl Sagan, and author Elie Wiesel. These national figures represented a broad cross-section of the political spectrum.

Since the scenes in *The Day After* depicting nuclear explosions and their effects may have been disturbing, ABC recognized its responsibility to alert parents to consider the issue of whether or not to permit their children to see the program. To this end, the prologue cautioned parents to use discretion in allowing very young children to watch the film. Further, a written advisory message appeared at the start of the picture and was repeated again prior to

the detonation of the bombs which occurred approximately one-hour into the film. The advisory read, "Although based on scientific fact, this film is fiction. Because the graphic depiction of the effects of a nuclear war may not be suitable for younger viewers, parental discretion is advised." An advisory also appeared on all on-air promotions for the motion picture as well as in the *Viewers Guide.*

POSTBROADCAST ACTIVITIES

Viewers' Reactions

The first indication of viewers' reactions to *The Day After* was revealed by the tone of their telephone calls to the network following the broadcast. The ABC Television Network switchboards in New York and Los Angeles tallied a total of 6,624 telephone calls after the telecast. Positive calls outweighed the negative ones by 3 to 1. Interestingly, only a handful of those calls mentioned the effect of the film on children. Further, ABC Audience Information reported having received numerous letters (1,419) in reaction to *The Day After;* the ratio of pro to con letters was 5 to 1.

The ABC Social Research Survey

In an attempt to go beyond the positive evaluations which the Nielsen numbers demonstrated, the ABC Social Research Unit commissioned a national survey of 1,921 respondents to provide greater insight into the social impact of *The Day After.*

Methodology. A questionnaire was developed by the ABC Social Research Unit and it was fielded by R.H. Bruskin Associates to a national probability telephone sample on Monday, November 21st and Tuesday the 22nd. A total of 1,921 respondents were contacted. The sample included children 10–12 years old ($N = 109$) and teenagers 13–17 years old ($N = 179$) as well as adults. The younger viewers were required to respond to the same questions as the adult viewers.

Findings

Viewership and awareness. Both awareness and viewership of *The Day After* were very high. The viewing audience constituted 53% of the sample. This percentage varied across age groups. Almost half (43%) of the children reported having watched *The Day After* and almost two-thirds (64%) of the teens did so. Similarly 64% of adults 18–34 reported viewing while 57% of

the 35–49-year-olds watched. The least viewing occurred among those 50 years old and older (37%). Only 7% of the sample reported having no awareness of the movie, with children and teens comprising more of this group (11%) than adults (6%).

Amount of program watched. Most viewers (69%) said they watched the whole program or at least most of the program (15%). Those who were least likely to stay with the entire movie were children 10–12 where 46% of them indicated they watched the whole program.

Viewing decisions. The most effective means to alert potential viewers that *The Day After* was to be shown on television was the on-air promotions; 65% of the sample reported that they learned about the program from commercials they saw on television. Other popular sources of learning about the program were TV guide/TV listings (26%), word-of-mouth (27%), newspaper ads (23%), and newspaper and magazine articles (17%). Many children (25%) reported having learned about the program from teachers or others at school (20% for 10–12-year-olds; 28% for 13–17-year-olds).

As far as what they had heard from these sources, half the sample (54%) said they found out something about what the film would be about (e.g., that it would deal with nuclear war and its aftermath; that it would take place in Lawrence, Kansas). This information was purely descriptive and neutral. Others (12%) reported that they had heard something about the emotional nature of the film and how it would affect them (e.g., that it would be dramatic, emotional, shocking, depressing, sad, or scary; that it would show graphic details).

Information of a political nature was another category (14%) of preprogram publicity. However, only 2% said they heard that the program was going to be antinuclear, and 2% said they heard it would be pronuclear. The rest was general political information (10%).

Finally, 21 percent said their previewing knowledge about the broadcast centered around some issue regarding children. However, only 13 percent reported hearing that there was a question as to whether children should see the film or that it might not be suitable for children under 12, and 1% heard that it was recommended for children to see.

Many viewers (62%) felt that whatever they had learned about *The Day After* before the broadcast had made them more interested in wanting to watch it. Interestingly, almost half (48%) of those who ultimately decided not to view *The Day After* said that what they had heard about the film had no effect on their decision whether or not to watch. One-quarter (25%) of the aware nonviewers claimed that whatever they had heard contributed to their decision not to view.

Those who decided not to watch *The Day After* gave a variety of reasons for their decision. Only 19% thought that the film would be too frightening or disturbing for them personally. Females were far more likely to feel this

way (26%) than males (9%), and this reason was most common for women over 50. This was also the most often cited reason for nonviewing 10–12 year children (24%). Only 8% of the 13–17 year old nonviewers gave this explanation for not watching.

Viewers' evaluation. Overall, viewers of *The Day After* evaluated the program favorably. Over three-quarters (77%) of the viewers rated *The Day After* as good-to-excellent; only 6% rated it poorly.

Those who rated the film favorably often pointed to the general presentation of the movie (48%) to justify their opinion, saying such things as "it was well done," "it was well produced" or "it was a good movie." Others (27%) said that the film "made people aware of what would happen in a nuclear war" and some (12%) offered the comment that "people need to know about it . . . [it was] something that needed to be shown."

When asked to substantiate their rating, very few respondents evaluated the film in terms of such controversial issues as politics and the question of whether children should view the movie. While a great deal had been written about how *The Day After* would produce a bonanza of antinuclear sentiment among viewers, this never came to pass. Six percent of the viewers evaluated *The Day After* in political terms, 3% offered a general political evaluation, 2% made an antinuclear statement, and 1% commented in a pronuclear vein. Similarly, a very small proportion of viewers (2%) offered evaluative comments regarding the issue of children watching *The Day After*. A mere .5% of the viewers indicated that they thought the film was not suitable or appropriate for children, and 1% expressed the opposite view. The remainder of the comments regarding children were of a general nature (.5%). This suggests that most people thought that children would be able to cope with the issues raised by the film. This belief that children would be able to handle any feelings brought up by the film was corroborated by their actual reactions to *The Day After* in the focus group research, discussed above.

The question of children's viewing was further examined by analyzing the adult viewers who actually watched *The Day After* with at least one child under 17 and found that over half (53%) thought the film was appropriate for children. Only 7% considered it to have been inappropriate or unsuitable for children to see.

Attitudes toward ABC and television in general. Two-thirds of the viewers (62%) were able to identify (unaided recall) ABC as the network that presented *The Day After*. This is even a greater number than those who were able to associate ABC with showing *The Winds of War* when it was telecast in February of 1983 (54% recalled ABC) (Lometti, 1983).

In addition, one-third (35%) felt more favorably toward ABC for presenting *The Day After*, and 60% said that their attitude toward the network remained the same as it had been before. Only 3% said their feelings about ABC were less favorable than before the broadcast.

Of those who felt more favorably toward ABC, many viewers praised ABC for having the "courage to present it" (21%) and for "sticking to their decision in spite of the controversy" (9%). Others said that there should be "more shows like this" (12%) and that ABC has "performed a public service" by presenting *The Day After* (7%).

Not only did many viewers of *The Day After* generally feel more favorably toward ABC for presenting the film but a large number (36%) took a more favorable attitude about television in general. Thus the film seemed to have contributed significantly to people's view of the television medium.

Attitudes toward rebroadcasting. An overwhelming majority (75%) of viewers felt that *The Day After* should be shown again. Furthermore, 81% thought that the movie should be shown in other countries.

The social nature of viewing. Viewing *The Day After* was largely a group event, and the film generated a great deal of discussion. Over three-quarters of the viewers (78%) watched the movie with someone else. The vast majority of these coviewing situations (95%) included at least one adult. Virtually all viewers (99%) watched at their own home or at a friend or relative's house.

More than one-quarter (28%) of the viewing audience said they made a special effort to watch with family members. Parents of 10-12-year-olds (74%) and those with 13-17-year-old children (79%) were the most likely to make sure to watch with their children. Conversely, most children and teenagers made a special effort to view with their parents (80% for 10-12-year-olds and 88% for 13-17-year-olds).

Many viewers (82%) discussed *The Day After* either during or after seeing the film. Teenagers (13-17-year-olds) were among those most apt to talk about it (93%). In fact, *The Day After* generated more conversation than either *The Winds of War* (50%) (Lometti, 1983) or *Roots II* (66%) (Wurtzel & Franklin, 1979).

Of those who discussed the film, most did so with at least one member of their family (56%), with friends or neighbors (48%), or with coworkers (35%). Children and teenage viewers mostly talked about the program with family members (64% and 63%) and with their friends (61% and 73%). In addition, a larger proportion of children and teens discussed *The Day After* in school, with teachers (40% and 52% for 10-12-year-olds and 13-17-year-olds, respectively) and with classmates (13% and 9%), suggesting that the *Viewers Guide* may have been an influential force in generating and guiding class discussion.

Viewers' response to advertisers. In spite of the "controversy" surrounding the telecast of *The Day After*, this study suggests that *The Day After* provided a favorable environment for advertisers. When asked about changes in their attitudes toward the sponsors of *The Day After*, more than eight-out-of ten viewers said that their attitude was either unchanged (68%) or they had no opinion (15%). Positive reactions outweighed negative ones by better than a 3 to 1 ratio, with 13% of the viewers indicating their attitudes

toward the sponsors were more favorable after the broadcast, while only 4% said their opinion had become less favorable.

These results compare favorably to two independent polls (J. Walter Thompson, 1983; Warner Amex Cable Communications, 1983) in which most people reported no changes in their attitudes toward the sponsors of *The Day After*. Of those whose opinions changed, far more positive shifts in attitudes towards the advertisers were reported than negative ones.

Viewers' reactions to viewpoint. The respondents were also asked about their reactions to the special ABC News *Viewpoint* program that followed *The Day After*. In general, viewership was good, and it was evaluated positively. One-third (31%) of the sample watched the *Viewpoint* program. The audience consisted of one-half (50%) of the viewers of *The Day After* as well as a small but not insignificant proportion (9%) of people who had not watched *The Day After* but who were aware of it.

Most who watched *Viewpoint* felt that it helped to clarify the issues raised in *The Day After* (68%). Of course, viewers of *The Day After* got more from the *Viewpoint* program (70%) than those who did not watch the film (55%).

Other Sources of Viewer Reaction

A number of published national surveys have assessed the effects the film had on political public opinion. These include a poll conducted by Smith, Berlin & Associates for Professor William Adams of George Washington University, a Washington Post Poll and an Abt Associates Inc. survey for Time. Results from these sources document no change in attitudes toward: the approval or disapproval of President Reagan; the likelihood of nuclear war; chances in surviving a nuclear war; defense and arms control issues; feelings of being politically powerless; or the approval or disapproval of a nuclear freeze.

Very few people associated any controversy with the sponsors of *The Day After*. This finding has been reported in a J. Walter Thompson national survey and corroborated by the ABC study. In these research reports, most people indicated no changes in their attitudes toward the sponsors of *The Day After*. Of those whose opinions changed, far more positive shifts in attitudes towards the advertisers were reported than negative ones. In both studies only 4% responded with a less-favorable attitude.

While a great deal was written about the potential harm of the film, there is no national research data or even anecdotal evidence to support these views. For example, in anticipation of presumed emotional injuries on the part of viewers, measures were taken by various groups around the country to provide help for the viewer-victims. WCVB-TV in Boston had six psychologists on duty manning a "hotline" for viewers who needed counseling

or were having psychological problems with the program. As it turned out, they received no calls of this nature and the psychologists ended up just handling regular viewer comment calls. Further, the American Legal Foundation, a Washington-based media public interest group, called upon individuals with postbroadcast emotional scars to contact them to wage a lawsuit for damages. They too received no calls, and thus initiated no suits (*Broadcasting*, 1983b).

CONCLUSIONS

The Day After proved to be a highly successful program. This motion picture was instrumental in focusing national attention on an issue of worldwide concern. It stimulated unprecedented levels of discussion, both before and after its presentation. The public's reactions to the film demonstrate that when television responsibly presents a controversial yet thought-provoking issue with sensitivity and in good taste it can result in a truly educational and enlightening experience.

All television programs may not be suitable for every viewer. By considering young children's reactions to *The Day After* from a developmental perspective ABC was able to make this important broadcast possible for the viewing public and at the same time insure that children would have a positive viewing experience.

Despite the widespread prebroadcast publicity that centered around such controversial issues as the film's presumed political overtones and its potentially harmful effects on children, the overwhelming majority of *The Day After* viewers did not evaluate it as a political film or as one that would harm children.

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